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ISC file 25X1

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
NATIONAL FOREIGN ASSESSMENT CENTER
24 April 1981

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MEMORANDUM

LEBANON: Edging Toward Disaster

Key Judgments

The fighting in Lebanon reflects the growing willingness of the Phalange to challenge foreign dominance of the country.

Bashir Jumayyil is the driving force behind Christian assertiveness. His ultimate goal is to control the central government in Beirut.

The Syrians reacted to Jumayyil's challenge at Zahlah because it threatened their control over the access to Beirut and the main avenue of approach for an Israeli flanking attack into Syria.

Jumayyil is trying to force Western intervention and is probably prepared to risk a new civil war to achieve it. He seems to believe this strategy is working.

Assad is prepared to risk a war with Israel rather than lose control over events in Lebanon.

Jumayyil is counting on the Israelis to bail him out should Syrian pressure on him become too great. They probably will.

Continuing escalation would generate intense pressure on the US by the Arabs to force Israel to pull back. Tel Aviv's resistance would quickly lead to a major US-Israeli confrontation, and the US would thus have alienated both our Israeli and Arab allies.

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The Soviets are using the turmoil to argue for their own involvement in international efforts to contain the violence. They will not support any plan that threatens to undermine Damascus' influence in Lebanon.

All parties to the conflict accept Sarkis as representing the legitimate authority of the state. He and the Army are the best hope for an acceptable mechanism to monitor and enforce any agreement. But no short term "solution" will hold for long while Bashir Jumayyil controls Phalange policy.

Discussion

The heavy fighting which has wracked Lebanon over the past three weeks reflects the growing willingness of the Phalange--Lebanon's largest and most powerful Christian faction--to challenge Syrian and Palestinian--that is, foreign--dominance of the country. In a deeper sense, however, the Phalange is acting out the frustrations of the Lebanese Christian community over the lack of progress toward finding a solution to the country's sectarian problems and toward ending Lebanon's role as a pawn in the Arab-Israeli dispute.

Bashir Jumayyil, the 33-year-old son of the Phalange Party's aging leader and head of its 20,000-man militia, is the driving force behind Christian assertiveness. His ultimate goal is to expel the Syrians and the Palestinians and to create and dominate a Christian region sufficiently powerful to control the central government in Beirut. He has moved forcefully over the past year to consolidate Phalange control over the Christian heartland and more recently has sought to extend it to Christian groups on its periphery, such as those in Zahlah.

Syria did not interfere with these efforts as long as they did not directly involve its interests or were limited to Christian groups over which Damascus did not in any case have much influence. The Syrians reacted to Jumayyil's challenge at Zahlah because it threatened their control over the central Bekaa Valley which controls access to Beirut and is the main potential avenue of approach for an Israeli flanking attack into Syria.

The Phalange Strategy

The Phalange is pursuing a confrontation strategy aimed at creating a level of tension great enough to force outside intervention. Jumayyil appears convinced that only major outbreaks of fighting in Beirut and elsewhere can draw the necessary worldwide, especially Western European and US, attention to the plight of the Christian community in Lebanon and motivate intervention on its behalf. He is probably prepared to risk a new civil war to achieve Western intervention.

Jumayyil seems to have used Zahlah to test his strategy and there is some evidence that he believes it has worked. Although

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he has lost the military battle to the Syrians he believes he has scored a propaganda victory in the West, particularly in the US, for his cause by, in a sense, martyring Zahlah. This is likely to embolden him to seek further such "triumphs" by baiting the Syrians elsewhere.

Israel's Role

Jumayyil is counting on Israel to bail him out should his strategy fail and Syrian pressure on him become too great. They probably will. Israel's aim is to prevent Lebanon from becoming a confrontation state responsive to Syria. It considers support of the Phalange and Major Haddad's southern Christian militia basic to this strategy and provides them with military training, advice, weapons, supplies, and other support. Senior Israelis, including Prime Minister Begin and Chief of Staff Eitan, are in direct touch with Jumayyil and have met with him during the current crisis. Although they may have urged him not to provoke a massive Syrian attack, they undoubtedly also reaffirmed Israel's unshakable support for the Christians' fight against the Syrians and Palestinians.

The increased Israeli raids into Lebanon and the tough public rhetoric by senior Israeli military officers reinforce Jumayyil's intransigence. Moreover, Jumayyil is heartened by what he perceives to be the new US administration's more receptive attitude toward Christian concerns and its more active anti-Soviet and pro-Israel policy.

The Syrians

President Assad has on the whole moved cautiously against the Phalange, seeking to avoid a confrontation with Israel while attempting to neutralize Jumayyil politically and militarily. Assad's basic strategy is to maintain Syria's dominance over Lebanon while allowing a controllable level of tension there as an additional bargaining lever in eventual Arab-Israeli peace negotiations.

Syria will not give in to Phalange pressure to limit its freedom of movement in Lebanon, however, nor will it agree to any international force there that would have a similar impact. Assad's still somewhat shaky domestic political situation and his isolation in the Arab world reinforce his conviction that Syria cannot afford to lose ground in Lebanon.

Assad is nevertheless prepared to risk a war with Israel rather than lose control over events in Lebanon. If Israel intervened directly in support of the Phalange, Assad would challenge Israeli forces and it is not at all certain that he would not allow the confrontation to spread outside Lebanon to force Soviet and US intervention. A confrontation with Israel

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would help him break out of his isolation in the Arab world and might also serve to rally domestic support for his minority Alawite regime.

The Soviet Position

Moscow's main concern over the present situation is the challenge it presents to the Syrian position in Lebanon. The Soviets will not support any plan that threatens to undermine Damascus' grip. Syria is the Soviets' most important Middle Eastern ally and the only Arab confrontation state with which they have good relations. The Soviets, moreover, rely on Assad to remain adamantly opposed to the Camp David peace process and to continue to pressure other Arab states--notably Jordan--to maintain their opposition. They also probably calculate that bilateral ties--symbolized by last October's Friendship Treaty--will help ensure a Soviet role in any future Middle East negotiations.

Moscow is also using the present turmoil to argue for its own direct involvement in international efforts to contain the violence. The Soviets may also exploit the situation to lend more urgency to President Brezhnev's 23 February proposal for an international conference on the Middle East with Soviet participation.

Lebanese Muslims and the PLO

Lebanese Muslims have so far largely avoided being drawn into the Syrian-Phalange conflict but this may happen if the fighting drags on. The Syrians are actively recruiting the Muslims for participation in their contingency plans for a multi-front campaign against the Phalange. Moreover, Israeli raids, Tel Aviv's provocative pro-Christian statements, and Haddad's shelling of Muslim towns in the south contribute to a growing polarization in Lebanon along Christian-Muslim lines, threatening to tear the cabinet and the Lebanese Army apart.

The Palestinians, too, have largely stayed out of the fighting, with the exception of the Syrian-controlled Palestine Liberation Army contingent in Beirut. But PLO head Arafat is under strong pressure from radical Palestinian groups to increase terrorist operations against Israel and to respond vigorously to Israeli preemptive attacks. This leads to a cycle of violence in southern Lebanon that only fuels the tension in Beirut and elsewhere in the country and, in turn, increases the risk of direct Syrian-Israeli hostilities.

Implications for the US

If left to their own devices there is little to prevent the Phalange and the Syrians from heading down the path of continuing escalation in the fighting, ultimately bringing direct Israeli intervention to bail out Jumayyil. This would generate intense

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pressure on the US by the Arabs--vigorously supported by the Soviets--to force Israel to pull back. Tel Aviv's resistance to US pressure to refrain from doing what it considers vital to its regional security interests would quickly lead to a major US-Israeli confrontation and the US would thus have alienated both our Israeli and Arab allies.

President Sarkis and his government are too weak to control events but nevertheless represent the only vehicle for a way out that all parties could conceivably accept--given sufficient pressure on them. The other Arabs see no effective way to moderate the conflict and are therefore reluctant to incur political costs by pressing the Syrians. Although Kuwait has called for a conference of all parties to the conflict, it has no idea of how to bridge the gap separating them.

All parties to the conflict accept Sarkis as representing the legitimate authority of the state. Building on this might serve as the fig leaf required to force agreement on a face-saving compromise that would at least serve to prevent a major explosion. Because the Syrian's maintain that their presence is a legitimate extension of the Lebanese central government's authority, they might be vulnerable to US and international pressure on them to increase their support for Sarkis' ongoing efforts to foster a dialogue among the parties and to expand the government's presence through the use of the Lebanese Army in a peace-keeping role. He and the Army represent the best hope for an acceptable mechanism to monitor and enforce any agreement. But no short term "solution" is likely to hold while Bashir Jumayyil controls Phalange policy.

The Lebanese Army is still largely Christian-led and many of its officers are Phalange sympathizers. Jumayyil might accept an arrangement whereby some of these units would replace Palestinian troops along the confrontation line in Beirut, for instance. Damascus might be pressured into accepting such an arrangement, provided no Syrian troops were replaced.

Any solution would, however, prove very unstable and require close monitoring by the US and continuing strong support for Sarkis. Jumayyil would continue to probe Syrian and Palestinian defenses and deliberately seek to keep tensions high to provoke outside intervention. A more lasting solution is possible only in the context of progress toward a settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute.

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